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The Screams in the Thicket

There's a sense of being in the thicket again, screaming while an indifferent — or worse — crowd walks on.

By Kathleen Hayes

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During the cold month of January 1944, Arthur Koestler wrote about a dream he kept having. "It is dark and I am being murdered in some kind of thicket or brushwood," he wrote. "There is a busy road at no more than 10 yards distance; I scream for help but nobody hears me, the crowd walks past laughing and chatting."

Koestler noted that he and others had been at it for about 10 years, beginning in 1933 when the German Reichstag was set on fire. "We said, if you don't quench those flames at once, they will spread all over the world; you thought we were maniacs. At present we have the mania of trying to tell you about the killing, by hot steam, mass electrocution and live burial of the total Jewish population of Europe. It is the greatest mass killing in recorded history; and it goes on daily, hourly, as regularly as the ticking of your watch."

We are not living in Nazi Germany; Oct. 7, for all its horror, was not the Holocaust. But there's a sense of being in the thicket again, screaming while an indifferent — or worse — crowd walks on. My X/Twitter feed contains scenes eerily reminiscent of the past. A Jewish professor is denied access to his own campus. Students form a human chain to drive Jews out of their encampment. A student protest leader calmly explains to an interviewer that Jews ("Zionists") don't deserve to live. A Jewish student is jabbed in the eye with a flagpole. A rabbi at one of the country's leading universities advises Jews to stay away from campus for their safety.

Above all, there's the atrocities of Oct. 7 and the world's response to them. "I have photographs before me on the desk while I am writing this, and that accounts for my emotion and bitterness," Koestler continued. "People died to smuggle them out of Poland; they thought it was worth while. The facts have been published in pamphlets, white books, newspapers, magazines and whatnot. But the other day I met one of the best-known American journalists over here. He told me that in the course of some recent public opinion survey nine of out of 10 average American citizens, when asked whether they believed that the Nazis commit atrocities, answered that it was all propaganda lies, and that they didn't believe a word of it!"

Koestler was writing in the New York Times to people whose attention he sometimes grabbed for a moment, so that "a certain

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themselves "like puppies who have got their fur wet" and resumed walking, "protected by the dream-barrier which stifles all sound." They were, in short, bystanders, disbelieving the atrocity reports but all too disinterested.

Today I'm haunted by people who are not disinterested, but are all too intent on denying the atrocity reports in defense of those committing them.

Today I'm haunted by people who are not disinterested, but all too intent on denying the atrocity reports in defense of those committing them. People like Susan Sarandon, dressed in a jaunty "Simpsons" jacket, continuing to walk briskly while a young Jewish Iranian woman tries talking to her about Oct. 7. "All those myths about babies in ovens and the rapes…" the actress says, her beautiful face contorted. "You are not up to speed."

Or there's The Intercept, founded by journalists Glenn Greenwald and Laura Poitras, which last month published a lengthy piece under the headline "Kibbutz Be'eri Rejects Story in New York Times Oct. 7 Expose: 'They Were Not Sexually Abused.'" The article is cited by "pro-Palestinian" supporters such as the Party for Socialism and Liberation, which published its own lengthy version "debunking" the accounts of mass rape. The socialists concluded: "To this movement, 'believe women' means believing the women of Palestine."

Or there's Electronic Intifada, which has issued a series of "exposes." During last month's installment — "NY Times found no Oct. 7 rape victims, reporter admits" — Ali Abunimah smoothly asserts that "there is no physical or forensic evidence" of rape, only "dubious and noncredible eyewitness accounts." His interviewer, Nora Barrows-Friedman, shakes her head. "Incredible," she says.

There's an oddly perverse kind of depravity at work here. It's actually more disturbing than extreme callousness. After all, you have to confront the evidence in order to dismiss it. You have to read about the young man at the music festival who left a final voicemail telling his brother he loved him and asking him to look after his kids; read about the kibbutz strewn with corpses; read about the little boys asking their grandmother how their mother died; read about the phone call with the 80-year-old who told his daughter the fingers on his left hand had been removed and who died as she begged him to stay with her — and wave it away like so much noise. Your only interest is finding something, anything, to tear apart. Inevitably you find it — a reporter's unseemly social media "like," a trivial inaccuracy — and declare that the overwhelming evidence that Hamas committed atrocities is a lie. You howl that 40 babies were

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You pounce on a tiny discrepancy to cast doubt on whether two teenage sisters were raped and ignore the undeniable fact they were murdered. You reassure your tribe that there is nothing to be troubled over, provide endless hyperlinks from sources agreeing with you, and confidently assume that no one will investigate what the enemy has to say.

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"A dog run over by a car upsets our emotional balance and digestion; a million Jews killed in Poland cause but a moderate uneasiness," Koestler wrote. Countless millions of people today are experiencing horrors in our troubled planet, and they barely prick the attention — assuming they're known at all — by today's "bien pensants." It isn't suffering that makes the Jews unique, but the clear signs that so many people — our college peers, work colleagues, former friends — think we deserve it.

So we go back to screaming, thinking that this time around, surely, people will hear. But they keep walking and chatting, or insisting there's nothing in the thicket at all.

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